Children of the Civil War

By Sandra Boyd*

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Getting a letter from a soldier father, "making lint," playing hopscotch, doing extra chores—these were part of the lives of children during the Civil War. The experiences of children who lived in the North were different from those who lived in the South. African American children who were slaves or refugees had different experiences than white children did. However, all children were affected in some way by the Civil War.

The war caused economic problems and many hardships on both sides, but the South was particularly hard hit. As the war continued, conditions became worse, especially in the South. Food was scarce, and children lacked many of the things they normally had. By the end of the war, many families were using the fabric from old curtains and flour sacks to make clothes. Some people made shoes from old carpets, canvas sails, belts, or saddles.

Children of slaves faced hunger, shortages, and difficulties like many other Southern children. Some slave children also suffered under crowded conditions in "contraband camps." Union armies set up these camps for runaway and refugee slaves in the areas the Northern troops occupied in the South.

Since so many men were in the army and away fighting, children had to take on added responsibilities at home. In towns, many children helped their families by taking jobs and working long hours to earn money. Farm children had to take on more of the farmwork that their fathers and older brothers once did. They helped plow, harvest crops, cut firewood, and tend farm animals. If their schools were able to stay open during the war, children also continued their reading, writing, and ciphering (arithmetic) studies.

The separation of families was particularly hard on children during the war, and they anxiously waited for letters from their fathers. The letters might contain small gifts or souvenirs. The men included stories about the war and spent time telling their children how much they missed them. In the letters, fathers gave advice and moral guidance for their children to follow.

Children enjoyed receiving letters, and they also wrote letters to their fathers and other relatives. Sometimes they helped pack wooden boxes with items to send to their loved ones in the army. Very young girls learned to knit socks and caps to include in the boxes. These care packages might contain a cured ham, writing paper, tea, or preserves. The senders filled all the spaces. For example, they might even put apples or onions inside boots they sent.

No matter what experiences children had, no matter where or how they lived, they wanted to know more about the war. Most Southern children did not have access to many of the toys,

games, or magazines about the war that were available in the North. Many of the children in the North went to see panoramas, which were large canvases of paintings showing various scenes from the war. They also visited exhibits of war-inspired items and photographs. In the South, children did not have as many opportunities to see panoramas or exhibits, but they sometimes had the chance to visit real army camps and hospital units. Many young children used whatever information they had about the war to make up "pretend" militia units and play war games. But they also played more traditional games that are still played today, such as hopscotch.

Besides working hard and "playing at war," many children were encouraged to take an active part in helping the war effort. Some children joined the army as drummers and fifers, but most children were not allowed to go into battles. Both boys and girls in the South "made lint" by scraping or picking lint from linen fabric. The lint was sent to hospitals to pack soldiers' wounds and stop bleeding. Sometimes children helped their mothers prepare food to be taken to hospital units.

As in any war, children were influenced by what they saw and heard and by the attitudes and feelings of the adults around them. Their childhood experiences during the war affected them as adults. Many Civil War children grew up to be influential Americans. Booker T. Washington, a young slave during the war, wrote about what the Civil War meant to him. He stressed achievement and hard work as the way for African Americans to end racism. Jefferson Davis's daughter, Winnie, was a baby when her father was president of the Confederacy. General Stonewall Jackson's daughter, Julia, was born during the war. Both of these girls participated in Confederate remembrance activities when they grew up. Theodore Roosevelt, also a young child during the Civil War, grew up to become president of the United States.

Although their experiences during the Civil War differed, the war affected all children. Many children suffered not only physical hardships but also emotional losses. They lost their fathers, older brothers, and other relatives during the war, causing drastic changes in the children's lives. However, children took an active part in helping their families and their communities survive both during and after the war.

**At the time of this article's publication, Sandra Boyd was a special education teacher at Apex High School in Apex. She also volunteered at the North Carolina Museum of History.*